



**Water North Coalition
Strategic Plan 2018–2021**

Revised October 2018



Introduction

The Water North Coalition (WNC) was formed in 2014 to build upon work completed through the Closer to Home (C2H) initiative¹ and to create a forum to address the water and wastewater challenges facing northern communities.

Voting membership is open to all northern municipalities, First Nations and Métis Settlements. Non-voting membership is open to water and wastewater commissions and professionals, provincial and federal governments, rural water and wastewater co-operatives, and owners and operators. Strategic advice and administrative support are provided by the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC).²

The *Water North Coalition Strategic Plan 2018–2021* was developed by both voting and non-voting members. It builds on the findings of the 2016-2018 Strategic Plan, a 2018 WNC Opportunities & Challenges Survey, and focuses on three priorities areas as defined by the membership: advocacy; education and awareness; and, recruitment, training and retention.

Opportunities that respondents identified include operator training and development, water line extensions, collaboration with First Nations, distribution and protection plans, and sewer service to outlying areas.

Challenges that respondents identified in the survey include costs associated with providing potable water in rural areas and changing government regulations, aging infrastructure, and environmental threats (untreated storm water, metals in groundwater, and the health of wetlands).

The Plan

The mission, vision and guiding principles were developed by members when the WNC was first formed. They were reviewed and revised or affirmed for the 2018-2021 strategic plan.

Mission

To find and implement northern solutions to water sourcing and water challenges through the following priorities:

- Advocacy
- Education and awareness
- Recruitment, training and retention

Some of these priorities are within the sole jurisdiction of municipalities, while others require collaboration with other levels of government. For example, the day-to-day operations of water and wastewater facilities are the responsibility of municipalities, while public education about our water resources is often shared by all three levels of government.

Vision

The WNC seeks to ensure that sustainable water systems are available to every northern community.

Guiding Principles

The WNC will:

- Share information on water and wastewater regulations and responsibilities.
- Work collaboratively with members and partners.
- Identify emergent workforce needs.
- Advocate for “made in the north” solutions and funding for training, education, recruitment and retention, and succession planning for municipal water/wastewater personnel.

Priorities

The WNC will focus its attention on the following three organizational priorities over the next three years.

Priority #1: Advocacy

As summarized in its guiding principles, the WNC will advocate for “made in the north” solutions to water and wastewater problems.

How will we advocate?

1.0 Increase awareness of northern water & wastewater issues.

Actions:

- Engage various stakeholders to share their concerns with the WNC.
- Prioritize concerns and develop an advocacy strategy to address them.
 - Engage more indigenous groups
 - WNC Chair attend events
 - Educate local MLA's
 - Meet with Ministers
- Invite Provincial and Federal governments to WNC meeting to present on issues.
- Advocate for more transparent industry standards, guidelines, and legislation in order to ensure provision of uncontaminated water.

1.1 Funding

1.1.1 Pursue more funding for northern water and wastewater distribution systems, including those found in hamlets, towns and rural northern communities.

Actions:

- Research potential funders and their priorities, including those of governments and industry groups.
- Raise the profile of the WNC at events like those held by the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA), the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA), and industry forums.

- Develop a strategy to obtain reliable funding that can be used when submitting funding requests to the provincial and federal governments.
 - It will: describe the need for stable funding for infrastructure and treatment upgrades
 - Reflect the real costs of operating water and wastewater systems.
- Continue to advocate for predictable and sustainable funding for water and wastewater systems (e.g., Water for Life and the Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP)).

1.2 Governance

1.2.1 Advocate for more municipal participation in federal and provincial reviews of legislation, regulations, and standards related to water and wastewater policies.

Actions:

- Engage with AUMA, RMA, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) on lobbying activities.
- Keep updated about developments at other levels of government and, in turn, keep other levels of government updated about issues and priorities related to northern water and wastewater.

Priority #2: Education & Awareness

Those participating in the 2018 WNC member survey that identified opportunities and challenges said there is a lack of public education and input with regard to water usage.

How will we educate members and the public?

2.0 Establish partnerships with agencies involved in water quality management and stewardship to support regional activities and help disseminate information to the public (Ex: Watershed planning and advisory committees/councils, local stewardship groups, members, and municipalities).

2.1 Advocate for stronger communication and information availability on standards, guidelines and practices by industry in relation to the source water protection plans and/or integrated watershed management plans.

Actions:

- Host open houses/engage industry leaders in constructive dialogue

2.2 Develop a ‘true cost of clean water’ public education campaign

Actions:

- Increase public’s awareness of how lifestyle impacts the (environment) water/waste water system, and the financial consequences associated.
 - Identify common activities that are potentially harmful to northern water/wastewater systems. *Ex: flushing medications down toilets, improper care of septic systems, improper disposal of RV wastewater, driving ATVs through muskeg, cutting down trees, leaks, running water needlessly (ex: brushing teeth), etc.*
 - Communicate the “true” costs (environmental impact and financial costs as a result) of clean water.

2.3 Develop a ‘Septic System Maintenance for Home/Acreage Owners’ online course.

Priority #3: Recruitment, Training & Retention

Respondents of the 2018 WNC survey on opportunities and challenges identified changing technologies, training, and employment as challenges within their communities.

Recruitment:

3.0 Develop a recruitment strategy to promote the water/wastewater career and attract local operators.

Actions:

- Establish a consistent standard for operator expectations on compensation, benefits, career advancement, etc.
- Develop a Career Management Guide (Intro to Water & Wastewater Treatment Operator Career Guide?)
 - Highlight opportunities within the career, networks, ongoing training, financial & in-kind incentives, standard compensation, etc.
- Develop an annual calendar of events (trade shows/career fairs) and designate Career Representatives/Spokesperson(s) to attend and speak consistently about the opportunities and benefits of the career.
- Engage Alberta Environment and Parks regarding national certification to standardize training to enhance the status of the profession, and to enable more interprovincial recruitment.

3.1 Marketing - Increase awareness of career opportunities and market the position of water and wastewater operator as a viable and stable career path.

Actions:

- Due to the current availability of labour, recruit and retain more water and wastewater operators.
- Offer more flexible work arrangements; possibly using retirees to provide staff relief.
- Participate in trade shows, career fairs, facility tours, and competitions aimed at encouraging students to consider careers as water and wastewater operators.
- Offer summer employment opportunities to students interested in becoming water and wastewater operators.
- Encourage more women to become water and wastewater operators.
- Take steps to attract local residents – those with roots in the community – to become water and wastewater operators.

- Establish interactive and standardized educational opportunities for youth (junior and senior high).
 - Regular schedule of plant tours, water testing, standardized presentation of information.

3.2 Encourage Alberta Trades³ to recognize water & wastewater treatment as a trade

Training:

3.3 Increase availability of affordable regional training and work experience opportunities for learners in the north.

Actions:

- Secure funding to reduce costs to learners and municipalities, primarily in rural areas. (*Ex: offset a portion of the 1800 hrs work expense, assist with moving and placement costs, funding for laptops and desktops for learners, etc*)
- Advocate for improved training and work experience opportunities in the north.
 - Lobby Alberta Environment and Parks to recognize value of hands-on experience during training.
 - Strengthen federal government’s commitment to supporting collaboration with First Nations & Metis Settlements as per ICF requirements for training.
- Establish existing northern facilities as credible/accredited training sites.
- Establish an on-site peer mentorship program for learners/new recruits.
- Develop work experience program with support from Alberta Education.

Retention:

3.4 Share information regarding compensation incentive programs and FTE needs to promote various retention strategies.

Actions:

- Develop a Career Management Guide/Platform
 - To match up operators/people with the information/resources they need.
- Organize an operators’ conference to facilitate networking, and promote new ideas, modern technology, and consistent messaging around current best practices.

³<https://tradesecrets.alberta.ca/trades-occupations/trades-occupations-list/>

3.5 Improve feasibility of regulatory requirements for Municipalities.

Actions:

- Develop regional operator co-ops.
- Establish region relief worker pools.
- Establish summer student/practicum student program.
- Advocate for funding to allow succession plan positions (ghost employee)

3.6 Share Resources

Small communities may only need part-time water and wastewater operators; agreements could be reached to share staff across communities.

Actions:

- Conduct a survey of each community's infrastructure and staff capabilities.
- Develop a shared service agreement for members to use and help protect against liability.
- Establish summer student/practicum student program.

Next Steps

The WNC will continue to work within their subcommittees and strive to achieve these outcomes.

